

## you are the best thing (that's ever been mine) by ceruleanstorm

**Series:** (something strange in your neighborhood) [6]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Choices, El is asked to chose, F/M, Mike and El angst, Miscommunication, The party argues about cartoons, awkward dinner situations, drama fic y'all ready for this, has a happy ending, joyce byers can't cook i love her but she can't, kali's such a complicated character so this should be fun

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Max Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Max/Lucas Sinclair

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**Summary:**

In 1984 Jane "Eleven" Ives picked Mike, her friends, and her family over staying with her new found sister. She doesn't regret her decision to save them instead of herself, but late at night she wonders what could have been if she stayed. Could Kali have changed? Could she? Now in 1989, Kali is back and asking once again- does Eleven save them, or will she save herself?

# 1. she'll never know your story like I do...

## Author's Note:

it's moi, Savannah.

this a little thing I've been planning since watching episode seven. I'm very interested in exploring Kali and El's relationship. so it will definitely come up in other fics I'm planning (\*cough, cough christmas au cough cough\*) Kali, I think is an example of how complicated female should be. She's not black and white, none of the women in Stranger Things are, and that's one of the reasons they're hard to write. Kali is obviously in a lot of pain when we meet her, and she has an interesting way of dealing with her past and her trauma. Is she making a mistake by going after those men? Well that's complicated. Did she make a mistake when she forced El to see Brenner? Definitely. But I do think that she is far from the abusers that the Duffers have presented on the show like Billy, Lonnie, and Brenner (fuck those guys) and that if she can heal in her pain, she and El can have relationship. Kali is allowed to be angry, in my opinion. I would be furious. Revenge and justice are normal things to yearn for. Kali is just misguided in what is redemption and what is damnation. I think she'll get there, eventually.

I'll get off my soap box now. (also Linnea- the actress who played Kali- did an amazing job and she's so beautiful (im so bi just ignore me) and I hope we get to explore the character more in the next season.)

this fic is just exploring how I think things would go down with Kali and the rest of El's loved ones. Warning, it's pretty much a soap opera. What can I say, I like milking things for drama.

I'll stop talking now

“So... are we just gonna keep sitting here?”

“You gotta better plan, Dustin?” Lucas asked the other boy. Dustin only shook his head.

“It’s almost been thirty minutes.” said Max from her end of the table, her head in her hands. She made to get up from her seat, but then the driven look left her face and she sat back down defeated.

Her words almost inaudible, it was Joyce who spoke next. “Should... should we go in there?” The response to her question came in the form of a loud thud of another breakable shattering to pieces, followed by more shouting.

“That sounded like the window.” Will whispered. He looked at his mother to see her blinking tears out of her eyes and squeezing his stepfather’s hand. He didn’t think it had anything to with how the shouts echoing off walls reminded the house of all the times Lonnie and his mom had screamed at each other.

“Maybe she’s just making a break for it?” Dustin wondered out loud. Like the rest of them, Dustin was fiddling with *something*, in his case it was his bow tie (“Why the hell are you wearing a bow tie?” “It’s fashionable, Lucas!”) to try and ward off the awkwardness that surrounded the Byers-Hopper dining room table.

Nobody answered Dustin. The next five minutes inched painfully by, each dinner guest straining their ears to try and hear, to try and get *some* idea of the words being they were throwing at each other. But their voices were muffled by walls, and to their own fault, by their own blind hope that they weren’t saying what they thought was being said. Max kept time with the old grandfather clock in the living room tapping her finger, each second reverberating off the mahogany of the table. It was the only sound louder than the fierce shouting.

“Should’ve just done what Mike did and taken off.” Lucas bit his lip. “Be better the sitting around waiting for answer we might not get.”

"C'mon Lucas, El- El won't go. She *can't* go." Max told him, her voice wobbling. She pursed her lips and turned her gaze away from him.

"Kali can't give El anything we can't give her." the Chief nodded. His voice was calm, his face straight. The only thing that exposed the fear that flooded his body was the way he held Joyce's hand in attempt to steady the shaking. Holy shit, he just wanted a cigarette. But he was about to lose the only reason he'd even stopped smoking.

He'd wanted to see her grow up so he broke the poisonous habit, wanted to grow old and to be there and support her more than anything. But now he might not get that chance.

"Are we so sure about that?" Lucas asked the rest of them. He was slouching in his chair, looking almost wilted. Gone were his perfect manners and pleasant attitude they had seen before dinner went south. *Honestly, fuck all of that*, he thought to himself.

Narrowing his eyes, Dustin shook his head at his friend. "What do you mean?"

"Can we really say that we've been there for El? That we tried to fix what we broke?" Everyone glanced down at the table. No one dared to speak. "We get it situations so fucked up- sorry Mrs. Byers, and then she *always* bails us out. We got our justice, for Bob, for Barb-" he paused a minute, his words sinking in, "but she never got hers. We never helped her go after the men and women at the lab. I'm sorry, we-we just didn't. Maybe we should have. Maybe then we wouldn't of lost her."

"We haven't lost her yet." Will replied. "She could still say no." He still had faith in his sister, even if the rest of them seemed to have given up.

"Kali offered El a once in a lifetime chance back in '84, to go after those bastards. El gave it up to come save us, and I'm not ungrateful but- but now Kali's giving it to her again. A *real* chance to make those monsters pay for what they did. If I were her and those men did that shit to my mom, I wouldn't be sitting around here in Hawkins." Lucas set his hands down on the table, a gesture showing his finality.

Max turned on him “Four hours ago you were finding every flaw you could against Kali, and now you’re what, on her side?”

“All I’m saying is that it makes sense she would go! We need to be prepared for that happening!”

“But to leave us, to leave Mike, to what? Go and kill those guys?” Dustin muttered. His eyes were glazed over and he was shaking his head, his curls flying wild around him. “That’s not vengeance, that’s—that’s murder. C’mon Lucas, even you have to admit you wouldn’t take their lives? Incrimination is one punishment but this is just using violence as a means to an end.”

“El wouldn’t kill. Not unless we or someone else was in trouble. She *wouldn’t* choose violence over us.” Will told all of them.

An infinite space hung in the room before someone, Joyce, her voice shaking, responded. “That’s not our decision to make.”

“We’re her *family*. That has to mean *something*, right?” Will half shouted, desperation leaking from his voice. No one responded. Instead a loud *crack!* came from the direction of El’s room.

“Do you really think that they’d be screaming at each other and breaking things if El had said yes?” Nancy asked, Jonathan next to her nodding.

“I- I don’t know.” answered Lucas. There was a look of hopelessness in his eyes, as if he wanted to believe Nancy, but couldn’t bring himself quite there. But still, he just wasn’t ready to face the truth. None of them were.

It was then Max looked at him. He saw tears glistening in her eyes and her knuckles white in a fist. “So what do we do now?”

“We wait.” Hopper said.

And so they did.

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2:43 p.m. Hawkins High School

Mike Wheeler was trying not to stare at his girlfriend. He should have been retrieving his Chemistry textbook and calculus workbook from his beaten up locker, covered in pictures of his friends winning the science fair last year, drawing a mustache and unibrow on Dustin in permanent marker when he'd been the unlucky one to fall asleep at a party, a picture of all them at one of Will's many art contests. Then there were pictures of him and her at homecoming all these past years, cuddled on the couch in the basement, kissing under stars in the light of fourth of July sparklers. And then there was just her, shots of her laughing and lying in the grass next to him, standing outside on the Byers' porch, dancing in the Wheeler's living room with his little sister.

It felt like all he could look at was her, because she was the only thing in the world worth marveling, and he couldn't believe she was standing next to him. El was humming a happy tune and tapping her foot as she waited for him to grab his things and take her home.

"You seem happy." he poked her in the stomach and she swatted him away, laughing. "What's that about?" Mike teased her as he shoved the books in his bag and shut the door, the sound ringing with a metallic *clang!*

"You *know* what it's about, you mouth breather." El threw her arms around neck, having to tilt her head to see him. "Why are you so tall?"

"So you would always have someone to reach the stuff on the top shelf. It's why I have you, you can open any jar I want." he teased her, watching the beautiful smile that lit up her face.

El shook her head and her curls bounced as laughed. "It's not that hard to open jars, Mike!"

"Okay, says the girl with *telekinetic* powers to the boy who has *no* muscle." he rolled his eyes, feigning hurt by throwing his head back for drama.

"I don't think you have *no* muscle." she smiled, squeezing his arm.

He let out a loud laugh and it echoed off the tile. They were the only

two left in the hallway as it was their senior release period, all of the underclassmen doomed to spend another hour in this hell. "Thanks, that builds my confidence."

Rolling her eyes, El stood up on her tiptoes, kissing her boyfriend quickly on the lips. "As long as you're getting the stuff on the top shelf, then I'm happy to do it."

"Guess we really make up for eachother's weaknesses," Mike wondered out loud, brushing a piece of her hair back, electricity sinking into her skin.

There it was again. The gravitational pull she had on him, the way he was always coming back to her. He was leaning in, their noses bumped together and El lit up with laughter, and he was about close the distance when-

"Uh, I'm sorry, I'm gonna have to write you two *sluts* up for PDA! Again!"

"What do you want Max?" Mike whined, staring over El's disappointed face to see the rest of their friends coming down the hall towards. Lucas and Max were swinging their intertwined hands back and forth, Max wearing a pair a of sunglass with her hair a frizzy halo around her; Will and Dustin were behind, in a heated discussion about what, they couldn't hear.

"I want you guys to stop making out in these sacred halls!" she gestured wildly to empty hall around them and Lucas sent her a sharp look.

"Sacred? You talk about this place like it's a church. It's a shit hole. And why are you still wearing my glasses babe?"

"Cause you know I look better in them," Max laughed, peering over the glasses. Lucas just shook his head and ruffled her already tossed hair that matched his afro. What a tribute to their decade, they were.

"We're never gonna get to make out if you guys keep interrupting us!" El turned around and put her hands on her hips, sticking her tongue out at her best friend. Max returned the gesture readily. Mike

put his arms back around El's hips, bringing her closer to him.

"All I'm saying is that it makes no sense that they would let someone that clutzy and that blind in their group! It just opens them all up to a weakness they could easily resolve!" Dustin was half shouting at Will, who was rolling his eyes.

"It's just a trope, Dustin! And besides where would the rest of the group be without Velma? Stuck on the first clue, that's where. They let Fred be the leader and he's dumb as a rock! Every character has a weakness." Will yelled back.

Dustin ran a hand through his wild curls. "First of all, how dare you speak about Fred like that, and if Fred's so dumb why are Shaggy and Scooby even there?"

"We already cleared that up Dustin." Will said, as if it was completely obvious, while the rest of them shared a confused look. "They're there for the very much needed comedic relief, Fred's just there to be pretty."

"What about Daphne?" asked Lucas, raising a hand.

"Seriously? You're gonna contribute to this trainwreck? You're definitely braver than I am." Max looked at Lucas with her mouth slightly agape and her hands up.

"Of course!" Lucas stepped away from Max and into the fire with Dustin and Will. "Have to be there to defend my girl."

"Smooth, Sinclair, smooth." But then Max too, turned around and inserted herself into the conversation, yelling something about how Fred was supposed to be the pretty and daft one and Daphne was just meant to kickass.

Then Lucas shouted "Fred's like Steve!" and all hell broke loose.

A look of pure betrayal came over Dustin's face, even Max gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "You take that back, you monster!" And so the argument continued at an even louder volume.

El was looking back to Mike again, her eyes resting on the softness of



his face and the freckles that were scattered across his skin like stars. She leaned against him, nuzzling her face in his neck, smiling.

*I don't deserve this*, Mike thought, chewing on his lip, trying to memorize her face. The fear he could lose her at any time haunted him day by day, and he held her tighter. "You're still in a pretty good mood even with this very loud argument taking place," he noticed. El looked up with that sweet smile on her face.

"Shut up," she teased and poked him in the stomach, "I'm just excited."

"I know. You really think she's gonna like us when we're like this all the time? Screaming at each other over a cartoon?" *Do you think she'll really like me?* The question hung in the air and in his head, ringing with familiar anxiety.

Back in 1984, El had run off while her guardian Hopper was worrying about Joyce and Will at the Department of Energy, in her search true home. Along the beaten path she took she discovered Kali, a young woman who like Eleven had been stolen as a child and experimented on as if she were a lab rat. Her ability was one that gave Mike chills when he really thought about it; she possessed the power to trick you mind into seeing- or not seeing, what ever she desired. El's lost sister.

El had told Mike all of this under the security of massive blanket fort they had built in her small bedroom in Hopper's hidden cabin, whispering because Hopper mandated the door remain open at all times. Ever so often Eleven's adoptive father would yell out "What are you two talking about?" and Mike would scream back "THE X-MEN!" and it would keep Hopper quiet for a while.

It wasn't a complete lie. Kali sounded straight out of the pages of comic book.

In quiet whispers, El told him all about Kali's friends. Funshine, Axel the spider hater, Dottie, Mick. She told Mike what they did. He tried not to let his nervousness show on his face when she told him "Kali and the rest of them, they hunt the bad men down and they- they kill them. When I was there," she took a deep breath, "I went with

them.”

“To kill the Bad Men?”

“This one man. He hurt Mama.” Mike swallowed but forced himself to nod. She’d told him about Terry Ives as well, and Mike wanted nothing more in that moment but to march down to the lab himself and demand they fix exactly what they’d broken. But just as when the Gate closed, killing all its slaves with it, the lab came to a close as well and all its slimy minions went with it. “So we went to Chicago and...”

Mike squeezed her hand, giving her the bravery to continue.

“I almost did it. I almost killed him. But then I saw this photograph. He had two daughters, and I- I couldn’t do it. But I almost did it.”

“Well, that’s okay. Every superhero has a moment of weakness El. The important thing is that you didn’t do it, right?”

She nodded.

El then went on to tell Mike that Kali was angry at her for stopping her from pulling the trigger. How El had felt like she had failed her when they made their break for it. They went back to their hideaway, only to be found by the police. It was then Kali had offered her one more chance to stay with her.

“She said it was home. That was were so supposed to be together.” El sniffed, hugging her knees to her chest, her heart aching as she thought of how Kali had cared and understood her in a way no one else could.

She looked up to see a confused look on Mike’s face. “But you came back?”

“Home’s not there. It’s here.”

Over the next few years, the only interaction she had with her lost sister was in The Void. Eleven would visit her on lonely nights after the rest of her friends had fallen asleep, just to see if she was okay. It continued on like this as time went on, as things changed. El never

asked to visit her, and Kali never came looking.

Then, last month, a letter appeared on the Byers-Hopper's porch in messy handwriting and on torn paper. It was from Kali, explaining if only in brief detail where she and the rest of her gang had been, but that was beside the point. Kali wanted to visit El in Hawkins, expressing a unique interest in meeting the family Eleven had become a part of.

Hearing from Kali had brought a happiness to El that Mike had never seen before. She seem to glow and shake with excitement, telling each of them about the letter and all the details it held, about who Kali was and who all her friends were any chance she could get. Kali was brought up in *every* conversation. She even begged Hopper and Joyce to let her dye part of her hair purple, but that was a solid "no" from Hopper.

It was Joyce who suggested they have a family dinner to celebrate. "It's only right that she stays with us after she was kind enough to let you stay with her in Pittsburgh. I think it would be special."

"Just Kali right?" Hopper had asked his wife, his eyes wide and pleading. "None of the other friends or criminals?"

Joyce nudged her stubborn husband with her shoulder, but El shook her head. "Just Kali. They're only coming for a night, then they have to get back."

"Oh, well are you sure she doesn't want to stay longer?"

"We're letting her stay *longer*?"

"Jim!"

El told her surrogate mother that she would extend the invitation once Kali had arrived. Eventually, Hopper had agreed with persuasion from Joyce. "Just as long as none of the other friends come!"

"You want me to come?" asked Mike, as the party sat in the Wheeler's basement the day after Kali's letter had come.

"I want you to meet her, I want you all to meet her." El explained.

"I thought it was just a family thing?" Max bit her lip and asked from her place on the couch.

"It is, but you guys are my family." After a chorus of "Ooh's" and "Awhs!" they had all readily accepted El's invitation.

"I'm already planning on being there." Will had shrugged, laughing at his own joke.

"Of course! Why should a fine gentleman like me turn down the chance to woo a lady?" Dustin bowed before El and she rolled her eyes.

"Woah there, Henderson, you're not wooing my lady." Mike flicked him in the forehead. He had to reach over El as she was practically sitting in his lap.

"Not her! I'm talking about Kali." he told them.

It was then Lucas fell on the floor, laughing and clutching his stomach. "You realize she could probably kick your freaking ass, right?"

"And I would thank her." Dustin's response was immediate.

Now it was the day of the dinner, and Mike could no longer ignore the anxiety that was making his chest constrict. Kali could probably kick *his* ass too on the off chance she didn't approve. He was just afraid El would let her. Her regard of Kali had only increased over the years, talking about her as if she worshipped the other girl. El had almost driven herself to the deep end trying to prepare for this dinner, making sure everyone including Hop would come in nice close and begging Joyce to not try her hand at cooking as it would most likely result in the house bursting into flames. Nancy had taken her out shopping for a dress for the occasion and later told Mike she had a meltdown in the stores when they couldn't find anything she thought Kali would like.

"I'm worried about her," Nancy had told Mike after she'd come home. "I've never seen her act like this, even with you. She feel

completely apart. I don't think she's slept much or thought about anything else."

"Yeah," Mike had bit his lip in hesitation. "I'm worried too." He tried to repress the sinking feeling he had in his stomach.

"Shaggy's not smoking marijuana! It's a *kids* show!" Will was yelling back in the present.

Max cocked her head to the side. "Well he's smoking something! Do you guys notice how Shaggy's the only one who can even see Scooby! And how do you explain why they're eating Scooby Snacks all the freaking time?"

"Maybe they're just starving college kids, Mayfield! Now stop ruining my childhood!" Will said, as if a week in the Upside Down and another as the Mind Flayer's slave *hadn't* ruined his childhood.

El was laughing at their argument, still leaning against him. Suddenly she twirled around and her hands flew up to her wild curls. "Shit, I forgot binder in the choir room!" Before Mike could say anything or stop her, she was already out of his arms and running down the hallway.

"Do you want me to come with you?" he tried to follow after, but she put her hand on his chest to stop him.

"No, I'll just meet you at the bike!" and with that El kissed him on the cheek and ran down the rest of the hallway, leaving Mike standing there alone.

"What's with the long face, Wheeler?" Max came up to him, bumping his shoulder. He tried not to roll his eyes.

"It's nothing." Mike brushed her off and started walking down the hall to the exit. *You're overreacting, Wheeler. Tonight will be fine. Kali will like you. She has to right? You're important to El. I mean, you got her aunt and Hopper to like you.*

"You guys ready for tonight?" Lucas asked as they caught up with Mike.

“Yep! Got my suit and my bow tie all out and ready to go! You think she’ll like these pearls?” said Dustin with a huge smile to show off his teeth. He added a *purr* for effect, successfully earning him a punch in the shoulder from Lucas.

“Dude! Stop that!”

“If you try that tonight, El’s gonna murder you while the rest of us watch.” Max shook her head. After studying her for a second, Mike noticed the subtle look of frustration on her face. “Remember the lecture?”

They all shook their heads that yes, they did remember. El had gotten onto the other day about the kind of behavior she expected from them at the dinner. It had taken them all by shock; Eleven never seemed to care about their rambunctious personalities and or their loud fights or their amazingly stupid jokes, and they’d be lying if they said that her change of opinion didn’t hurt. Had she been embarrassed by them all this time and just never said anything?

“No dirty jokes, no betting on anything while you’re at the table, and *please* don’t start anything! I’m talking no food fights!” she had told Max, Lucas, and Dustin the day before, her tone ironclad.

“Okay, *mom*. ” Max answered, but El had already turned around. Mike had sent her a look of *what are you doing* but all she sent back was a blank, unaware stare.

Max pouted in a corner of the basement the rest of the evening.

Now she stood with her cross, sass coming off her in waves, an air she’d perfected from her hair and indoor sunglasses. “Another night to pretend we’re civilized.” Mike couldn’t see, but he’d bet a lot of money that she was rolling her eyes.

“You really think El would get mad if I try to put these smooth moves” Dustin gestured to the rest of himself “on Kali?”

“I think I would get mad. No I take that back, I *definitely* will be mad at you.” Lucas shook his head. “And besides, are you sure you want to flirt with *Kali* ? The chick kinda of murders people for a living, or

have you forgotten that?"

"She doesn't murder people for a living." Mike protested as they walked out into the chilly December air.

"Uh, yes she does, Mike. She hunts the Bad Men down and then she shoots him. *Bang!* And didn't El say all her weird friends rob this shit out of those places they go to kill the Bad Men?"

Mike didn't say anything, only kept walking. "Does it ever occur to you guys that we're eighteen years old and still call Brenner's lackeys the 'Bad Men?' he asked, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket searching for his keys, but no one answered. "Just think of Kali and her gang as like Batman, Robin, and like I dunno, the Wonder Twins?"

"The Wonder Twins? Are you *serious*, man?" Dustin shook his head and he stopped walking, the rest of the group leaving him behind. "First nobody appreciates my man Fred, then you guys have to bring up Super Friends?"

"Mike, the Super Friends aren't motherfucking killers!" Lucas' voice was so loud as he hopped onto the hood of his car it scared off a group of pigeons ravaging a trashcan nearby. The party had arrived at Mike's motorcycle and Lucas' chevy. "You ever see Batman or Robin pull a gun from their utility belts? Or make anyone crazy by showing them something that wasn't even there?"

Mike sighed. He was running out of ideas. "No, but-"

"Why does El worship Kali?" Max inquired from behind them. Her voice was quiet, her words almost gone unheard, and the others turned to look at her. Her eyes were downcast and the sunglasses, as well as the attitude, were gone.

"I dunno," Mike answered honestly, because he wondered himself. He knew El saw Kali as this badass rocker chick who had taken control of her past and was rightly making people pay for the pain they had caused, but all he could picture was a bitter and angry person who hadn't healed from years from trauma and abuse. Mike didn't know anything about therapy or recovery, really he didn't, but he just

knew- maybe from too many years of reading comic books over the years- that deep down, Kali had chosen a path there was no coming back from. Was he so selfish because he didn't want that for El?

*It's not your place, Wheeler! Can't you just be happy that her family is finally complete?*

*Yeah, but, he couldn't believe he had stooped to arguing with the devil's advocate in his head, I thought her family was already complete.*

"She's always said Kali is her sister, so maybe it's a sister thing? Holly looks up to Nancy like that so..." he shrugged.

"Except that Nancy's never shot somebody." Dustin pointed out.

"We don't know that." throwing his hands up in the air, Mike rolled his eyes. "I think, I think El just sees Kali as somebody she can relate to. You know, because of the whole years of abuse and trauma I guess we just couldn't understand?"

"Hey!"

"What the *hell* ?"

Both Max and Will looked like someone had just murdered their cat.

"Doesn't living with that shitheads that are my step brother and father count?" Max demanded, stomping her foot as if she were an upset child.

*She has every right to be,* thought Mike, but he quickly shut up that part of his brain.

"And what about me?" asked Will, "does dealing with severe PTSD just not qualify as trauma anymore? I'm her brother! Max is her best friend, and that's not even mentioning you Mike! You're her freaking boyfriend! You've spent more time with her than *any* of us! If El needed someone to talk to, she could talk to us!"

"I don't know why she doesn't, okay?" Mike shouted, running his hands through his hair. "You think this doesn't bother me either? Because it *does* !" A lot!"



It bothered Mike because it wasn't just that Kali had tried to convince El that salvation could be found in revenge, but what Kali had *done* to El in trying to persuade her. He didn't find out until many years after El came home to them, but one night the memories of her time in the lab were haunting her.

"I just can't forget him." They were lying close together in the Wheeler's guest bedroom, where no one could find them and yell about close proximity on bed. She was clutching him tightly, and he had her enveloped in his arms. "I'm afraid...I'm afraid that I have this wound, and that it's not healing. Mike, what if it kills me?"

Mike brought her closer, kissing her forehead. "It's not going to, I promise." he whispered, brushing the curls out her face.

"When I was with Kali, she made me see him. Brenner. In my head."

"And- and he told you this? When he was in your head?"

Her eyes glistened with tears and she nodded. And then it was too late, the seeds had been sewn. As hard as he tried to like Kali for the sake of El, he didn't think he could ever forgive her for using El's ghosts to manipulate her. If anything remotely resembling a repeat of that happened tonight, Mike figured he'd just fight off Kali himself, and as he looked at the faces of his friends, he knew that they would too.

"It's just one night, guys. All we have to do is behave for a couple hours while Kali's here and then we can go back to arguing about Scooby Doo and Super Friends or Muppet babies or whatever. Everything will go back to normal after this." He told them, and the shook their heads in stubborn agreement.

"Don't even get me started on the Muppet babies-"

"Just get in the car, Dustin!" Will yelled, slapping a sketchbook on the car's hood. Dustin put his hands up in the air and followed Will's orders.

"Okay, whatever," Max pushed past Mike to get into the passenger's seat of the chevy. "But I'm not dressing up for this stupid dinner."

“See you guys tonight?” Mike asked, looking through Lucas’ open window. Lucas turned ignition and the car roared to life. Max had slumped in her seat, and Dustin and Will were back to arguing about cartoons in the back.

“See you tonight, man.” Lucas then drove off and Mike heard Dustin yell one more time. “I still can’t believe you said Fred is like Steve.”

Leaning against his bike, Mike ran a hand through his mess of curls as he waited for El.

*God, if you’re really out there, he silently prayed, please keep shit from hitting the fan, and if you’re in the mood for it, please explain why I have such a bad feeling about this....*

-

*6:51 pm The Byers-Hopper House*

“You look nice, sis.”

El jumped, whirling around to find her surrogate brother standing next her, all dressed up in a suit and tie. “Thank- thanks Will.” She smoothed out a ruffle in her purple skirt, and took a deep breath. “You look nice too.”

“It’s what you asked for.” Will shrugged.

El took another deep breath, trying to refocus her mind. She started pacing back and forth the length of the living room. Along with the purple skirt, she was wearing a black blouse, her loose curls pushed up with a ebony headband. El tried not to bite her nails or play with the curls or mess with her makeup, instead fiddling with the golden chain around her neck. It had taken her an hour to finally, *finally*, get everything right.

“You kind of remind me of Dustin pacing like that” said Will as he took a seat on the couch. El continued pacing. “Are you nervous?”

She nodded.

“Relax El, there’s no reason to be. From what you said, she sound’s

cool. I'm sure everything will be fine." he gave a honest try in easing her anxiety, only to have her narrow her eyes at him. His words were comforting, but he wouldn't look at her, choosing instead to stare at the stained carpet.

"Mike was being weird today." El mentioned, still playing with the necklace. He'd given it to her on their sixth anniversary, when he told her about the future he thought the universe had in store for them.

"I know we're young," he said, so much love in his eyes as they danced in the darkness of her room, "and that things could change, but I can't imagine living my life without you."

She had kissed him then, tears on her face. He wanted to be with her? Always? But there was no doubt in El's mind that Mike wanted her, flaws and history and all, just the wonder he ignited in her. "I want that too."

Forever with him. That sounded beyond perfect.

"I think he's just nervous about tonight. He wants to make a good impression on Kali, we all do." Will told her, but she kept pacing.

"Kali will like Mike." She smiled at her brother. "Everyone likes him."

Will tilted his head. "Were you worried that she wasn't going too?"

"No of course not, but he just seemed off today. And Max seemed mad at me."

"Max is just mad she has to dress up." Will ran a hand through his hair and was bouncing his knee.

El sighed, wringing her hands together. "I'm going to kill her if she doesn't." she muttered and all of sudden Will stood up, hands out of his suit pockets.

He was several inches taller than her as El capped off at 5'3, and in this moment, it was like he towered over her. "El, please, relax. People are picking up on your anxiety, it's making us a little nuts."

“What do you mean?” Confusion came over her face. Her breathing became shallow and she tried to back away from her brother. She *was* relaxed. Did he really want to see tense?

“I just mean-” he started to say, but was interrupted by someone knocking at the door.

If Will hadn’t moved out of the way, El would have run over him. “She’s here! Go tell Hopper and Joyce.” she shouted, shooing Will out of the living room.

Once he was gone, El swallowed, trying to pretend she hadn’t seen the hurt look on his face and paused to take another deep breath, her hand hovering over the knob.

*You can do this, it’s going to be okay. You can apologize to Will later. Open the door.* Her hand shaking, El turned to the knob and opened the Byers’ door.

“Kali.”

## **2. shoulda known I'd be the first to leave (think about the place where you first met me)**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Joyce messes up in the kitchen, Kali and Mike don't hit it off, Lucas says what we're all thinking

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

alas, it is I! not dead, just suffering from severe confidence issues. but I haven't abandoned this story, and hope you enjoy!

*6:46 pm The Byers-Hopper Kitchen*

Even on her best days, Joyce Byers was not the best cook. This, of course, had made it hard to feed her two boys as they grew up, but it never stopped her. She was the master at mac'n'cheese, grilled cheese sandwiches, and hot dogs. True, she was no Karen Wheeler in the kitchen, but she did her best, sometimes trying her hand at bigger and healthier dinners for Jonathan and Will, and later El and Jim on special occasions. So what if she accidentally used baking soda in place of salt once and sometimes set things on fire?

*This* was a special occasion, and she would not mess this up, not this time. Joyce had only ever heard stories of El's adventures outside Hawkins. Yes, El had chosen their small town as a place to call home, but the places she had run away to back in '84 were as much a part of her as Hawkins was. The people were apart of her too. Joyce had had the pleasure of meeting her aunt and birth mother even before she met El and then, of course, later on. Now Kali had found her, like family always does. Joyce couldn't fathom the pain that either Kali or El had experienced, being stolen away from their mothers and fathers and locked up, experimented on, forced into torture. It made her physically sick, but she did have to admit that she was glad El had all her friends and Hopper, even her as a surrogate mother, as well as a warm house to come home to. The thought of El, or *any* of her

children, out on the street in a big city, kept her up at night.

When Joyce suggested they have a dinner, she knew that meant cooking. What she hadn't expected though, was El's wishes for her to leave it be.

"I don't want to make you do anything you're not comfortable with. You're already letting Kali come over. I just- I just... want the food to be good." the words spilled out El's mouth as they talked in the kitchen after opening Kali's letter, her expression one of guilt and honesty.

It didn't hurt Joyce's feelings, the comments about the food, but up until then she had believed El had a little faith in her.

"Well then, who is gonna cook, kiddo?" Jim asked her from his chair at the kitchen table, his eyebrow cocked, as he stirred more sugar into his coffee.

"I could cook!" El perked up. Before that moment she had been biting her thumb nail, her eyes wild.

"El, sweetie, you may not have been born in this family but you still cook like you were." Jim told her and El's shoulders fell. "Just let Joyce cook, okay? She can make the best stuff out of any of us, either that or Jonathan makes breakfast foods."

El had nodded her agreement, but trust, she still lacked. All this week El would come to talk to her after she got home from work, their conversation normal until she would sneak in a question about what she was cooking. Joyce would tell her and they'd get to talking again, and then it would be what are the ingredients in the food? What temperature do you cook the food at? How long should it stay in the oven? What is the difference between salt and baking soda?

It was hard not to roll her eyes at the last one.

Each time they talked about dinner, or the conversation about normal things turned into a conversation about dinner, Joyce assured her she had it covered. She had phoned Karen Wheeler to get some fairly simple recipes and bought the ingredients exactly as the other woman

had specified. As soon as the kids were home from school, Joyce began prepping each part of the meal so she would have enough time to do everything just right. And she called Karen again, just for safekeeping.

And somehow, she had still screwed it up.

The second things went awry, Joyce didn't spend time panicking. Well she did panic, but she could multitask, and ran from the kitchen down the hall to her bedroom to find her husband. He was standing in front of the vanity mirror, a grimace on his face as he stared down at himself.

"Hey does this look okay cause if not El's gonna-what's wrong?" Jim started to say but then immediately changed course when he saw his wife's face.

"Oh, you look nice, Jim!" Joyce began, trying not spend too much time looking at her husband in a dress shirt and tie.

"What's *wrong* , Joyce?" he asked again, "Is it dinner?"

She threw her hands up. "Do the math, Jim! And hurry, I need your help!"

"What's going on?" they raced down the hall, on each others heels, passing Will and El in the living room (they took no notice) straight into the kitchen where a single pot covered by a lid bouncing ever so slight in lay on a burner.

Jim looked around the kitchen with wild eyes that eventually settled on the pot of demise once he noticed it shaking. "What happened?"

"I followed the recipe just like Karen said, I *swear* , and I put the vegetable oil in and I guess I had the heat on too high because-" gestured Joyce wildly at the pot.

"Because what?" Jim asked, but he was interrupted by Jonathan running into the kitchen. His tie was in a partial knot and his shirt wasn't all the way buttoned, his hair flying out in every possible direction.

“What’s going on?” he half shouted, “something smells like it’s burning, Mom!”

“I know that, Jonathan!”

“ *What’s going on in the pot, Joyce?*” Jim had grabbed her by the shoulders and then pointed to the pot, shaking, the lid bouncing even more with every second.

Whipping the cover off the pot, she shouted “This!”

“GREASE FIRE!” Jonathan and Jim yelled over each other. Immediately Jim was pulling her back from stove and pushing her behind him.

Almost instantaneously, the room was enveloped by thick white smoke, sending the three of them coughing and wheezing. High and bright orange and yellow flames licked the edges of the pot, growing taller and taller as it breathed in new oxygen.

“What do we do?” Jonathan pulled his mother even further away from the from the cooking disaster.

“I don’t know!” shouted Joyce in a panic, “I tried putting water on it to put it out-”

“You did *what?* ” Jonathan nearly screamed. “You can’t put water on a grease fire that will make it worse!”

“Well thanks, Jonathan, now I know that- *What do we put on it ?*” Joyce couldn’t help but shout at her son. As they spoke the flames in the pot climbed higher, tendrils of smoke writhing from the flames.

Jim was searching the cabinets, slamming wooden doors and rummaging and tearing through their contents with the intensity a grizzly bear. “Baking soda! We need baking soda! That’ll put it out!”

“Baking soda?” That Joyce knew. She whipped around, yanking the little box out the fridge, white powder exploding everywhere as she shook the contents out on the fire. “Go out! Go out!” she screamed, Jim trying to pull her away from the stove again. “Go out!”



The white power circled the kitchen in a flurry like a snow storm, what never made it to the flames landing on Joyce's nice dress (that just *had* to be black, nice choice, Joyce). The fire simmered and coughed, dying pathetically. Joyce pressed the lid back onto the pot with force, letting out a shaky breath. "Next time somebody makes fun of me for the baking soda mistake, I *swear* to God."

"That's the last time we ever let you cook in this house again, Joyce." sighed Jim. He then shuffled over to window above the sink and pulled it open, his breathing still heavy.

"What are we going to do about dinner?" Joyce ran a shaky hand through her hair, sending baking soda flying around her like a white halo. "El's going to kill me if she finds out I messed this up!"

"I could whip something up, night breakfast maybe?" Jonathan offered after a fit of coughing.

"No, she didn't want that. She wanted a *real* dinner-"

"Since when does El not think breakfast counts as real food?"

"And I messed this up and I promised her I wouldn't! Ugh, I'm a terrible mother!" Joyce put her head in her hands.

"Hey, you're not allowed to say that anymore, remember?" Jim was behind her then, rubbing her back. "It's Will's rule."

"I know, I know!" sighed Joyce.

"We'll just have to-"

"Hey guys, El wanted me to let you know that Kali's here-"entering the kitchen, the carefree smile on Will's face faded instantly as he took in the scene before him, his mother covered in baking soda, his step dad and brother looking like they'd both just had heart attacks. "Something was on fire, wasn't it?" They nodded. "Something was on fire. Great. Well, Kali's here, and El's already super nervous about everything so I advise we not tell her you just tried to burn the house down."

"Do you have anything helpful to add to this conversation?"

Jonathan sent Will *the* look, and Jim and Joyce could have both sworn he *was* in some way related to Jane Hopper.

“Do you?” Will shot back with absolutely no hesitation.

“Boys, enough!” Joyce told them, but they both were snickering. “We need to figure out something to do for dinner.”

Jonathan stepped up. “Listen, stall Kali and keep El out of the kitchen. Once Nancy gets here we’ll figure something out to cook. I mean, there’s gotta be something we can make.”

Joyce looked from her sons to her husband. “Alright, Jonathan. I guess it’s time to meet the guest of honor.”

-

*6:43 pm, Mike Wheeler’s Bedroom*

“Well, don’t you look nice in a suit and tie! Who knew?”

“Ugh, quit it Nancy!” With an irritated groan, Mike stopped fiddling with his purple tie and stepped away from his mirror to find his older sister standing in his doorway. “My life is so much easier when you’re in New York!”

Nancy smirked. She stood wearing a long red gown, ornament flowers adorning the top, all of it matching her bright red lipstick and bouquet of roses she held in the crook of her left arm. “If I was in New York would you ever have figured out how to tie your tie?”

“Shut up.” mumbled Mike as he shoved his foot in a dress shoe. Only he hadn’t untied the laces, and was just helplessly shoving his foot in having been doomed from the start. It was a full 45 seconds before he got the shoe on right.

“Probably be easier if you didn’t have such giant feet.”

“Are you ready to go or are you just going to stand there and insult me all night?” Mike threw his hands up in the air, trying not to draw attention as he struggled to put his *other* shoe on.

Nancy only shrugged, handing him the bouquet. "Figured I'd get a few good ones in to keep your ego down. After all, you are going to be showered in praise tonight, El showing you off as she usually does. "Mike is so amazing!" his sister sung in a falsetto, throwing her head back, "He's so brave and handsome- even though he's a giant dork!"

"Oh, so that's what El sounds like to you?" Mike asked as they made their way down the stairs.

"Don't take it personally, I'm just trying to make a point." Nancy told him, sending him a look before she stepped into the kitchen where their mom was waiting with an apple pie that would be gifted for dessert. Mike grabbed the keys to the car, half hesitating and biting his lips after seeing the keys to his motorcycle, a recent gift from Nancy and his parents. "Are you coming?" his sister asked, suddenly standing at the front door with the pie.

"Let me know how Joyce's dinner turned out!" their mother shouted before the door slammed shut.

"You wanna know what you and Jonathan sound like?" Mike rolled his eyes and followed her out the door, launching right into his impression with a gravelly voice, "Oh, Nancy, come join me I'm brooding! Let's listen to *real* music and take down an oppressive government organization cause nothing else about me is interesting!"

"You sound like a jackass." Nancy said, getting into the car.

"At least I'm not dating one."

Nancy only shook her head as Mike backed out the driveway, muttering underneath her breath "Asshole."

The rest of the car ride was spent in silence, no more insults about significant others thrown in each other's direction as Mike made their way to the Byers-Hopper house.

"Are you nervous?" asked Nancy, out of the blue. They had been stopped at a red light and were still about five minutes from their destination.

"No." Mike bit his lip, tapping the steering wheel. "Why would I be

nervous? It's just Kali, I mean, there's nothing to worry about. Totally normal dinner at the Byers house, everything will be cool."

Nancy clicked her tongue and narrowed her eyes at her younger brother. "Are you trying to convince yourself or me?"

"I'm not nervous." Mike said, this time with more added bravado and confidence.

"Really? Because you're knuckles are white, your left eye is twitching, and everytime we stop your knee starts bouncing."

Grimacing, Mike stopped his shaking knee and loosened his grip on the steering wheel. "You might as well join Steve at the Police Academy instead of majoring in business since you're suddenly so observant."

"One male dominated workplace at a time, Mike." Nancy commented, giving him some serious side eye. "You know, no matter what Kali thinks of you, nothing is going to change after tonight. It'll still be you and El, like always. Kali will go back to... where ever she's from, I can't remember."

"Chicago." Mike mumbled.

"Okay, Chicago, and everything will go back to normal." she finished.

"Really, Nancy? Normal in Hawkins?"

"You know what I *mean* ."

Sighing, Mike relented. He could only stand acting the fulfilling role of annoying younger brother for so long. "I know, it's just... I have this bad feeling about tonight."

The light turned green, and Mike put his foot on the gas. Next to him in the passenger seat, Nancy didn't respond. She did keep looking out of the corner of her eye; Mike would notice every time he looked in the rearview mirror, every couple of seconds until he parked in the Byers' lawn next to a van he didn't quite recognize.

"Dammit," Mike cursed as he got out of the car. "I thought we were

early! I wanted to get here before Kali so-”

“So you’d look good?” his sister finished before he could.

Mike spent a good four seconds glaring at her, her face seeming to say *“you’re wasting precious time!”* She wasn’t wrong, about either point. But what was wrong with being a supportive boyfriend? “I meant so I could talk to El.”

“About your bad feeling?” This took Mike by surprise. She hadn’t said it with any snark or any hint of sarcasm. She just was genuinely... vague.

So, having no smart comeback to send his sister’s way, Mike walked with her to the front door. He knocked, and a minute passed before Will answered

“Hey guys!” Will’s cheerful attitude made Mike relax slightly. Will just happened to be a good indicator of the main emotions circling in a room, well, usually when he wasn’t being chased or possessed by an interdimensional tentacled monster. If Will was calm and was greeting them happily, it most likely meant the evening was off to a good start. “Are those for me? You guys shouldn’t have!” he pointed to rose bouquet in Mike’s hand.

“We didn’t, there for El. But this is for you.” said Nancy, handing Will the apple pie.

“I guess this makes up for the fact you didn’t get me flowers.” Will shrugged, “Come on inside, I’ll put this in the kitchen. Where I hope it doesn’t burst into flames.”

“What?” Nancy and Mike asked, perfectly in sync, as the followed Will into the house.

“Uh, nothing, it’s nothing.” he muttered quickly, “Everybody’s in the dining room, I’ll meet you guys in a sec.”

They turned into the dining room, Mike swallowing panic upon seeing Dustin, Lucas and Max lounging at Mrs. Byers’ table, Dustin all dressed up in a tux, contrasting Lucas, who wore normal formal attire. Max slouched in her seat, looking all too pleased with herself

in a big grey hoodie.

“How did everyone get here before us?” Mike whispered to Nancy, who was searching the room for Jonathan.

“Maybe because it took you so long to get your shoes on.”

At the edge the room stood El, Mike’s heart swelling and his panic easing once he laid eyes on her. Of course she looked absolutely stunning, confidence and excitement radiating off her like she was the sun, and Mike would be blinded for staring at her in complete wonder.

Next to her must’ve been Kali Prasad. A young Indian women, the tips of her long black hair dyed a vibrant violet color, stood fierce in a long black dress, her face just as excited and happy to be finally talking to El as El was to be finally talking to her. Gone was the image of a punk rockstar with a purple mohawk and ‘stick it to the Man/fuck the government’ demeanor. However, she was wearing a surprising amount of jewelry, the faux silver of her earrings and nose ring shining in the light of candles set out by Will’s mom. But Mike felt he could see past that. Maybe Kali “008” Prasad would just be a normal dinner guest that night. Maybe Mike’s feeling of doom was misplaced.

He waited a good five seconds, but El did not turn and just notice him as he was hoping as the rest of his friends said their hellos. In their conversation she stayed, animated and glittering beautiful in the candlelight. God he was a sucker.

Only did El leave Kali’s spell when the other woman excused herself to go the restroom, Will being chosen to be her guide (Mike would later remember how readily Kali talked to El’s step-brother), to scowl at Max. “I thought you were going to dress up, you promised!” Mike’s attitude soured a little; he understood that Max was irritated, but she couldn’t have done this one thing? El only asked this!

“She did dress up,” Lucas gestured to his girlfriend and her outfit, “this is her nice sweatshirt.”

“Yeah, it’s the one without any blood on it.” added Max, slouching

further in her seat. Mike tried to abstain from rolling his eyes.

“Max, come on,” El tried again. Her eyes were wide and pleading. “Can’t you just change into something from my room?”

“Nope! I’m going to see if your mom and dad need help in the kitchen.” Max announced. She then stood up from the table and walked from the room, Will shouting after her “there’s nothing in the kitchen, don’t go in the kitchen!”

“Fine, I’ll just go to the bathroom!” turning her direction, Max threw her hands in defeat.

“Isn’t Kali in there?” Dustin yelled, Max shooting back a nasty “I’ll wait!” that shut him up quick enough.

“She could’ve helped by dressing up.” El twiddled her fingers, her eyes trailing the path Max had taken.

“It’s okay, El. Everything will be fine” Mike spoke up. Once she finally looked at him, her eyes lit up and her shoulders relaxed. “Hey, you.” he gave her a little wave.

The dread that had been building in his chest since Max and El confronting one another ceased when she enveloped him in a hug. “Mike! I’m so glad you’re here, you took so long.”

It took an immense amount of will not to turn and glare at Nancy, knowing she was smirking in the wake of this glorious victory. He didn’t need another comment about his feet.

“Yeah, me too.” whispered Mike, tripping on his words, letting himself get lost in her hazel eyes for a few infinite seconds. “Uh, I got you these.” he mumbled, pulling out the bouquet of roses. Petals were falling to the carpet.

“Oh, Mike, they’re beautiful. You didn’t have to, how expensive were these?” she asked, caressing the red blossoms.

*Spoken like a true member of the Byers’ family.* “Don’t worry about it, it’s a special occasion.”

“Thank you.” El said, kissing his cheek. “I’ll ask Joyce to put these in water-”

“Don’t go in the kitchen!” Will jumped up suddenly and whisked the flowers from El’s arms despite her shock. “I’ll put these water, sis, I got it covered!” And then, just like that, Will disappeared from the room as if he had never been there at all.

“Is there something going on in the kitchen?” a voice from the behind them asked. Kali stood at the entryway, her eyebrow raised in a knowing way. “He’s seems adamant we stay away from it.”

“Yeah, and he only calls you sis when he’s like super nervous.” Dustin pointed out from his seat, having previously been more interested in his conversation with Lucas.

“It’s probably nothing.” El waved it off, but Mike could see her hands shaking. He opened his mouth to say something ( *aim for calm this time, moron, not stupid*) to help her but then she was pulling him across the room. “Kali, this is Mike, who I’ve been telling you about.”

Up until that exact moment, Mike had been certain of his confidence. That false bravado and swagger (okay, yeah, he wasn’t known for it) lasted right up until Kali began to look him over, her head tilted in just the slightest fashion. This went on for thirty seconds straight, Mike trying not to break eye contact with this, despite being a complete foot smaller than him, terrifying woman who could easily make him hallucinate his deepest, darkest fears without so much as closing her eyes. Mike swallowed and held his hand out to shake hers.

“Hmm.” was all Kali said. She turned away from him then, leaving him out to dry.

“Um, uh,” El’s grip on Mike’s hand tightened, and if somebody had blinked, they would have missed the slight flickering of the lights. “This is Nancy, his, uh, sister and Jonathan’s boyfriend.”

Mike’s mouth fell agape when Kali took Nancy’s hand to shake. ( Oh if *he* could make the lights flicker) “It’s nice to meet you Nancy. You’re dating Jonathan, what is that like?”



“Oh, it’s um...” Nancy trailed off, “it’s nice. He’s a- he’s a good guy. You’ll like him, you’ll like all the guys here tonight.”

“I look forward to getting to know him.” Kali nodded and then turned to talk to Dustin and Lucas, asking them about Hawkins.

“Bad feeling’s back again.” Mike whispered to Nancy, trying to hide his voice and panic from his girlfriend. El let go of his arm and sat down, a look of lost in her eyes. He was making to sit down next to her, when he heard his sister.

“Is she gonna try and steal my man?” There was a confused face on Nancy for a second, then snapped out of it and looked to Mike. “So she’s not impressed with your first impression? You’ll have other chances at dinner, stay *calm*. ”

“What? Someone is not impressed with Mike Wheeler? *Shocking!* ” A voice heavily drenched in sarcasm whisper-shouted behind them.

Mike just shook his head. “Thanks for the boost of confidence, Max. And I am calm!”

“Would a calm person have to insist that?”

“Max!”

Will, again, came to save the day as he appeared and walked towards Mike and Nancy. “Everything okay, dude? In the kitchen, I mean, do you like need our help?” Mike asked him.

“Nah,” Will shrugged and Mike sent his sister a look. *Nah?* “But Jonathan’s in there, if you want to go see him.”

“Uh, okay.” Nancy looked from Mike to Will, then walked out of the awkward conversation in the direction of the kitchen. Max had returned to her seat opposite of El, slouching to her content, and glaring daggers at Kali. Sighing, Mike took the seat between the two. Only when he reached out his hand to take El’s, she moved away from him, sending a shockwave straight to his heart. No, it couldn’t be, was it? Maybe... maybe she was ashamed of him?

The night held many moments for him where panic threatened to get

the best of him and he desperately wanted to run. Moments where he was internally berating himself for taking the car instead of his bike, the pull to ignite the engine and drive until he no longer felt the shame El glanced at him with. After every moment, every close to death encounter, every damning moment the universe kept them apart, did she really not want him? After all this time, were they not still a team? An unbreakable partnership? Maybe not anymore.. But in this moment he stayed where he was. Even if she was ashamed, even if she didn't want to be seen with him, he still loved her, and he was determined to stay with her through this.

He still loved her.

Besides, Kali wouldn't be here forever, right?

"So, Kali," they all heard Dustin say and looked up to watch him sliding toward her, "you like these pearls?"

"Lord Jesus Christ Almighty." It was Max that beat them all to it.

-

*7:32 pm- The Byers-Hopper Dining Room.*

"So, Kali, what's Chicago like?" Joyce asked. There was a slight shift in the room as everyone turned from Joyce at the head of the table to Kali at the other end.

"Um," Kali pursed her lips, "Quite loud, actually. Hawkins is rather quiet in comparison. It's odd without the noise."

"It's what we're known for, believe it or not." Lucas perked up, and was about to continue when interrupted by a very eager Dustin.

"Nothing ever happens in Hawkins!" he half shouted, making El jump and three or four empty plates hiccup. "Whoops, sorry, El."

"It's fine." She murmured. Barely blinking, the plates shifted back into their original positions and Dustin whispered "wicked."

"Dustin, *shut up*." Mike sent him a look and shook his head. Then his shoulders fell and his gaze fell back to the stained tablecloth.

El knew this was her fault. When he tried to take her hand, she rejected him. It was like the light had been taken from the happy bright boy she loved, and she was the one who had snuffed it out. She wanted nothing more than to reach out to him again; he was her stability, her support, if anybody could help her withstand the storm of anxiety wrecking havoc within her, it was Mike.

It had always been Mike.

The only reason El hadn't taken his hand was because she was in shock. No matter how she set it up in her head, she couldn't understand why Kali hadn't taken to Mike. *Everyone* liked Mike. Teachers, their friends, parents, neighbors, people at the freaking grocery store (ones the two of them weren't banned from) store, her aunt loved him, which was amazing because she hated almost everyone else, *Hopper* even liked him. He could be awkward as if he was still trying to figure things out, and El loved that about him, but he could also be charming and sweet. He'd just bought her *roses*, of all flowers. And yet Kali hadn't bought any of it. She'd just made him uncomfortable and ignored him as if he meant nothing.

El never expected to here from Kali ever again, that November night in 1984 when the world was ending and she turned her back on the older girl, choosing to save her friends instead of avenge her mother and be with her sister. On the bus home she had reasoned that maybe, once her friends were safe, she could look for Kali. Maybe Hopper would help her, he had the whole box on Hawkins Lab, maybe he knew something she didn't. But then El came back and closed the gate. She came back to Hopper, and she had a family again, she had a father figure who was *nothing* like Papa. Then Hopper married Joyce (one of the best days of her life), and she had a mother and two brothers who welcomed her in like she was one of them. She had Dustin and Lucas, who made her laugh with her arguments and protected her on her first days of high school. And she had Max, once the ice had thawed, her best friend who taught her how to skateboard and invited her to sleepovers. Mike. She had Mike now, her first and only boyfriend, who loved and loved her for miles and miles, holding together her broken parts. There was no leaving him again, she'd decided, there was no leaving *any* of them, not even to find Kali, not even if there was this hole festering inside of her,

destined to be the end of her.

Because Kali was never completely gone. She was present in El's dreams, her figure stayed in the Void where El could always return. But even in dreams, even in the Void, Kali's presence was convoluted, a part her shadowed from El's mind. El could know where she was, but not what she was doing. El would wake up in a fit of tears, angry at the consequences of her choices. Angry she could never have it both ways, have her family in Hawkins and have Kali. Angry that this would never change. And so she would bundle herself up in her comforter and sneak in to Will's room to lay on the chilly carpet until she fell back asleep.

When the letter from her lost sister showed up on her doorstep, El saw her chance. Her chance to have it both ways. Maybe after this, Kali would want to send her more letters, call her even, like she called Nancy and Jonathan in New York. Kali Prasad could exist outside El's psyche and the stories she told, and maybe, if Kali could meet her family and her friends she could understand why El left her for them. Maybe, just maybe, she could stay too.

Everything was going according to plan. Kali met Will, Dustin, and Lucas and their conversations felt comfortable. Of course she loved them, even if Dustin's terrible flirting (they all had Steve to blame for making him this way) made her slightly uncomfortable, she still laughed at their jokes. But then Max had been her first bump in the road, snide, rude, and purposelessly undressed and El began to unravel, barely together in the first place. And then Mike.

Of course, to top off the fact that relative she only had one shot with didn't like her boyfriend, there was *whatever the hell* was going on in the kitchen that Hop and Joyce were conspiring to hide from her, and the reason they were sitting at the table twenty minutes into dinner *with no food* and Will's eye was twitching. Once Mike and Nancy had arrived, and then Nancy disappeared, Joyce and Hopper had come out the kitchen (smelling like *smoke!* And *why* was Joyce covered in white powder, because that didn't look suspicious at *all* to someone that came from the streets) to greet Kali.

"So sorry about dinner," Joyce apologized as she and Hopper took their seats, gesturing to everyone to follow. "I didn't think it'd take so

long, but I must of miscalculated. Jonathan and Nancy are watching the food to make sure it doesn't get, well, overcooked. They'll be out," Joyce and Hopper shared a quick glance, "shortly. But they didn't want us to wait for them."

"Are you sure they're not just making out?" Max asked loudly, still slouched in her chair. El thought she was going to faint at the shocked look on Kali's face. This was *not* going according to her plan.

"Nah, of course not." said Will. Kali nodded as if she believed him, but Dustin sent him a look and asked "Um, why do you keep saying nah?"

"Because-" Will choked, "I always say nah."

"It's fine. It was very nice of them to watch the food for us." Kali commented and El relaxed a little. If only her boyfriend wasn't grinding his teeth next her.

Their Not-Dinner continued into the evening, conversations light, but El felt heavy with guilt. She was being torn in half by her need to go to her boyfriend, to fix what she had broken, and to prove to Kali these people were worth her decision, and it left her frozen in place, her brain barely able to compute every next second.

Kali shifted in her seat. "It's been very nice to meet you all, I've really enjoyed your company, but aren't we missing one?"

"Oh, I'm sure Jonathan and Nancy will be out soon-" Joyce started but Kali interrupted her with the shake of her head.

"No, not Nancy and Jonathan. Jane told me about another boy that would be here, she wanted me to meet him. What was his name? She said he had great hair." Kali finished.

"Oh, you mean Steve!" Dustin popped in. "Yeah, he's actually at the police academy right now, but he's coming back for the summer."

Nodding, Kali crossed her fingers. "That's a shame, I was hoping to meet him. El made him sound very charming. Police, though, that's interesting."

"Is there a problem with police?" Hopper asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Of course not, nothing at all. It's just, Jane did mention she had crush on him when they first met." On Kali's face there was a sly smile, and it took everything in El not to whack her head on the edge of the table. Embarrassing secrets, was what it was time for apparently, and she knew Hopper could drag her through the coals over this.

"It's okay, El, everyone had a crush on Steve at some point." Dustin laughed from his end of the table, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Will nod ever so slightly. "I mean Max had this *huge* crush on- OW!"

"You deserved that." whispered Lucas.

"Yeah, but did Max have to *kick* me-"

"Guys!" Mike threw his hands up in the air, glaring at them like he was a disappointed parent called in to the principal's office to discipline his terrible kids. "Behave!"

Quickly, El snuck a look at Kali at the end of the table. Her facial expression was bored, but she didn't look angry. That El could cope with. "So, Lucas," Kali changed the subject in the blink of an eye, and El tried to ignore Mike's downtrodden look. So far she'd talked to everyone *except* Mike. Then she talked about someone who wasn't even here instead of talking to Mike. "El told me before dinner started that you got accepted into Yale. That's very exciting, what will you be studying?"

A look of shock came over Lucas and he eyed El, seeming to ask *is this okay?* "Oh, law. I'm studying law."

"Will Max be going with you?"

"Oh, not really. She'll be going to a school that's also in Connecticut, but they're not really by each other. It's like thirty minutes away, so we'll still see each other and everything." he rambled off, casting nervous glances at everyone.

Kali merely brushed it off. "Max what are you studying?"

If there was a god, El was praying to them in that moment. *Please don't say farts, please don't say farts.* "I don't know yet, but I was thinking," she gave a shrug, "maybe investigative journalism?"

That was the first anyone any of that, including Lucas, but still, he looked at his girlfriend with beaming pride and surprise. Meanwhile, Mike wouldn't even look at her. "That's awesome, babe! I mean- I know you might not pick it, but for what it's worth, I think you'd be really good at."

*"Have you decided your major?"*

Mike looked up from his chemistry homework and smiled at El for a moment, before his face fell and his gaze fell back on his text book. "My parents want me to study engineering."

"Okay," El moved her essay out of the way so she could move closer to him on the basement couch. "But what do you want to study?"

"Uh, I don't know." Mike bit his lip. It was all El needed to know he was lying through his teeth.

*"I think you're lying, Michael Wheeler. And friends don't lie, especially when they're boyfriend and girlfriend."*

This made him laugh, and take her hand, and suddenly the butterflies that never seemed to fly away when he was near made their return. "I haven't heard that one before. But it's not a lie. It's just, my parents will pay for engineering."

"You know I'm going to get the answer from you sooner or later, right? You can't hide anything from me." El asked him, brushing a stray curl away from his face.

"I know. But maybe not today?" There was a fear in his eyes she could not name, so El let it go. For today. "Why do you ask?"

*"Because I picked mine!"* she told him, practically jumping out of her seat.

"Wait, really?" Mike laughed and took her other hand. "What is it, what'd you pick? Because you'd be good at like, anything."

El beamed at him. *"Speech and Language Pathology."* She didn't even wait for him to ask, she just launched straight into her explanation. *"It's a type of therapy that helps people speak and helps them with language acquisition, it's amazing Mike. And it can be applied to all kinds of people, all different ages! I read about it in this book my dad got me a few weeks ago."*

*"That's insane, El. And really, really cool. I think you'd be amazing at that! You're so good at understanding people, it blows me away every time. I think you were made for this."* They were both jumping up and down on the couch at this point.

*"Really?"* El asked him with eager eyes. *"Cause I really want to do it."*

Mike laughed, pulling her closer. *"Wow, I couldn't tell. But really, El, you're gonna be amazing."*

*"That means so much, Mike. I love you."*

*"I love you, too."* And then El was even closer, and their foreheads were touching. *"And hey, I here that Indiana University has a really good Speech and Language Pathology program."*

El squeezed his hand. *"And what's the engineering program like?"*

*"I don't think it matters."* There was so much love in his eyes, it went on and on for miles. Screw any questions about their future. Their lips met, and the chemistry homework and essay were long, long forgotten. It was only the two of them, and happy kisses filled with love and interrupted by laughter, noses bumping together as if they hadn't done this a million times before.

*"Thanks, babe."* Max said in a soft voice, bringing El back to the present. The present where everything was falling apart and Mike was mad at her. *"That means a lot."*

*"I'm sure you two will have plenty of adventures."* Kali smiled at them. El was certain for a second that her approval of Max and Lucas was going to make Mike get up and leave. *"Dustin, Will, where will you two be going?"*

*"Well, Kali,"* started Dustin, leaning back in his chair, *"I'm deciding*



between a few places, gotten a few offers from different people, namely Caltech and MIT.”

Kali raised her pierced eyebrow. “Really? Are you not following in Steve the policeman’s footsteps since you have a crush on him?”

“I do not have a crush on Steve!” gaped Dustin, while Max, Lucas, and Will tried to stifle their laughter. “ *You* have a crush on Steve.”

“Will’s going to NYU.” Joyce bragged as if she couldn’t wait to say it anymore, her expression brimming with joy. Will nodded in the midst of the praise. “Carrying on our newest family tradition.”

“I’m gonna try to get my bachelor’s while I’m there, and Jonathan and Nancy live up there, so I’ll just stay with them. Then I’m thinking about trying to find an Art Therapy program I could get a Master’s, and then I can help kids with trauma.” explained Will, and then an excited look came over him. “El and I were actually thinking of teaming up, she just got accepted into the Speech Therapy program up at IU, I’m thinking at some point we’ll *have* to collaborate.”

There was a change in Kali’s face. Where her rapt attention had been on Will as he spoke of their plans for the future, suddenly she was back to staring at El. “Jane, you’re going to university?”

“Of course she is, why wouldn’t she be?” Hopper narrowed his eyes.

“I expected different of you.” El swallowed, and even though every part of her was telling her not to because Mike couldn’t be anything but furious with her, she grabbed his hand under the table. There was no disappointment or malice in Kali’s words, but only confusion, and hurt, maybe? “I had hoped, that under the circumstances and with, you would consider something else.”

“What else would she consider?” Mike dropped her hand and demanded of Kali with venom, speaking for the first time that night. El’s fingers formed a fist, and she bit in her lip. As much as she loved her dad and Mike, it was not their place to speak for her.

“What do you want me to consider?” asked El softly.

“I was hoping there would be a better way to broach the subject, but

I think now might be the best time to explain my reason for my visit.” Kali took a deep breath. Everyone’s eyes were on her.

Hopper’s grip was white on the table. “Yes, please.”

“Jane, the reason I came is that- is that I want you to come with me, after you graduate of course. You can come home, and be with me.”

In that moment, it was as if time had stopped. Some otherworldly force paused the emotions of the room, stunning the occupants. No one breathed. No one moved. No one spoke. And it was tearing El apart.

*I want you to come with me.*

Time stayed frozen but El’s panic did not. Every promise she’d ever made to her family in Hawkins, to her friends who never gave up on her, to Mike for their future ran through her head, colliding with every dream, every vision of Kali crying out to her in the infinite blackness of nothingness. She wanted Mike and Hopper to yell, she wanted Max and Lucas to protest, wanted Nancy and Jonathan to come back in and she wanted Mike to demand the meaning of this, she wanted *noise* because the silence was going to be the death of her.

“*And eventually, it will kill you.*” Brenner’s words. No- Kali’s.

“Can I talk to you? Alone?” El asked Kali.

And with, that they left the room.

-

*7:59 pm The Byers-Hopper Dining Room*

*“Goodbye Mike.”*

All Mike could feel was his shaking hands. The room around him had become distorted and cold (there was no chance he had accidentally done acid, was there? No, of course not, this was worse, this was a full on panic attack). There was too many people were talking, but their voices were muffled and far away. What exactly where the

saying? Mike wondered for a moment, but his mind, his memories were somewhere else.

*All week this is what they'd been running from. This is the thing that took Will. To that place, and now the monster was here. Dustin and Mike shouted and shrieked for Lucas to move faster- the rocks weren't working, of course they weren't they were rocks. Guns, bullets, nothing could take this thing. They were gonna die, and Mike was going to break his promise to Eleven. And then, then the Demogorgon was up against the wall- had they done it?*

*She wasn't supposed to get off the table, she'd saved them enough. Over and over, she'd saved their asses. But she never did listen to him, really.*

*"Eleven!"*

*And why would she now? Mike was thrown against the back row of cabinets and Eleven moved forward. The Demogorgon shrieks are deafening and the lights flicker and shatter. He's going to lose her, he knows that now.*

*"Goodbye-"*

*"Mike!"*

Someone's voice, Will's, was loud enough to bring him back to the room. "Are you okay?" They were all staring him suddenly, eyes wide with worry. Mike let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding.

"I'm fine, just in shock, that's all."

Will shook his head, his face insulted that his friend would so boldly lie to him. Mike was going to have to be more convincing to the rest of the crowd.

"Do you think-" Max stole his attention, her face a few shades paler than her already porcelain skin. "Do you really think she'll take Kali's stupid offer?"

"Why are you asking me?" Mike stuttered, running his shaky hands through his hair.

“Because you know El better than any of us.” whispered Hopper. The Chief’s eyes bared into him as if his whole world depended upon Mike’s answer, and he wasn’t wrong. Mike’s whole world depended on his answer too.

*“I can’t lose you again.”*

A shaky breath is all he can manage, and then his brain can form words. “I don’t- I don’t know- She’s been so excited about senior year, I mean graduation, prom-”

“She already has her dressed picked out. We spent hours dress shopping.” Max pointed out, and soft smile on her face..

“She picked out two different ones, for prom and graduation.” added Dustin.

“And she’s so excited for IU, for her speech therapy classes. I seriously don’t she’ll just give up on it. I mean, Will, remember how excited El was when you talked about an Art Therapy degree and teaming up, she *freaked*. All she wants to do is help other people, El doesn’t turn her back on anybody, and she wouldn’t abandon us.” His words noticeably calmed the worried crowd. Ms. Byers took a deep breath, Dustin and Lucas share a nod. Max stopped biting her thumb nail. “Not again.”

*“Are you trying to convince yourself or me?”*

Those were Nancy’s words earlier to him in the car, when she was asking if he was nervous. God he knew something like this would happen, *he* knew. He’d always tried to trust his gut, and his gut told him something was going to happen at this shitty dinner there wasn’t even any food for. And now El was going to leave him.

No. No, he wasn’t going to give up that easily. El had made a *promise* . A promise that she wouldn’t leave again. And El *never* broke a promise. Besides, she’d spent the last five years in Hawkins building a normal life, something she waited so many years to have. El loved school, she loved her teachers, her friends, she loved the party and her family. What were the chances El would forget her trip with her adopted dad up to Indiana University? It was all she could talk about

for weeks, meeting the professors and seeing the campus. Why would she give that up to go with Kali?

Mike bit his lip. He knew El would always live with the pain of her past, but was he really foolish enough to believe that he alone could relieve it? If she went with Kali, Kali could help her with her trauma in a way none of them could, because Kali went through it, Kali understood, and as hard as Mike tried, he never could. He had had a normal child, while El was being thrown in dark closets and electrocuted and forced to kill animals. Was he lying to himself if it didn't sound tempting, to go on an adventure and seek vengeance for the people who wronged her? Compared to that, all she had here was a boring life with him, stuck running in circles from pain she was tethered to.

"Okay," the door to kitchen open, briefly interrupting Mike's spiral, and in walked Nancy and Jonathan, "here's where we stand with the food."

"Good, I'm starving!" Dustin sighed, slumping into his chair.

"Dustin," Lucas threw his hands up in the air, "bigger problems here!"

"And where we stand with food is that we couldn't find anything-" Jonathan started where he left off, but was interrupted by Will.

"It took you 30 minutes for you to figure that out?"

"Well we tried a couple of things but they all needed vegetable oil... or baking soda." admitted Jonathan, with a side glance at his mom. Joyce just put her head in her hands.

"But the good news is that we found the take out menus, and we know it's not the fancy meal you wanted El, but it's better than the nothing we have- wait where is El?" Nancy asked as she looked around the room.

"And Kali?" added her boyfriend. Nancy just looked at him suspiciously.

Lucas let out a loud sigh. "Well, about that-"

"The only real reason that rock-n-roll chick even came to Hawkins was so she could wisk El away from here!" Max shouted, launching out of her seat and slamming the table.

"Wait, what?"

"Because none of us matter, *apparently*."

"Kali asked El to come back to Chicago with her," Dustin translated, "Turns out she didn't really want to meet anybody of us."

Nancy's eyes fell to Mike. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm *fine*, why does everyone keep asking me that?" Everyone just stared at him. "Guys, it's gonna be fine. El's not going to leave."

"What makes you so sure?" Max demanded, towering over him with her hands still on the table. Mike swallowed. It had been a few years since he'd been the smallest one in the room. And he remembered why he didn't like that feeling.

Standing up, Mike repeated himself, "You said it yourself, I know El the best. And the El I know doesn't break promises. She'll tell Kali no and to back off. Kali messed up big in the past and El hasn't forgotten that."

"What are you talking about?" Hopper's nostrils flared. And that was Mike's first mistake. (Minus even showing up to this disaster of a not-dinner and then ignoring his girlfriend because she hurt his feelings.)

*"I'm afraid...I'm afraid that I have this wound, and that it's not healing. Mike, what if it kills me?"*

*Mike brought her closer, kissing her forehead. "It's not going to, I promise." he whispered, brushing the curls out her face.*

*"When I was with Kali, she made me see him. Brenner. In my head."*

"It's..." Mike took a deep breath. "It's just Kali tried to make El do something she didn't want to, right, be apart of her gang of murderers and criminals. But that doesn't matter! I just don't understand- why don't you trust El to make the right decision?"

“Because she’s been talking about Kali, *non-stop* , all week, and she had this stupid dinner! No offense, Ms. Byers.” Max rambled, “El’s been ignoring all of us ever since she got Kali’s letter. She acts like Kali is the only one who understands her-”

“Kali was Brenner’s prisoner too, if anybody understands what El’s been through-”

“And that’s exactly why she’ll go, Mike. Cause compared to Kali, we don’t have anything to give her. We’re just not worth it anymore.” Lucas shook his head.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the rational one here, Lucas?” Mike turned and headed for the dining room’s exit. “Look, I’m going to go talk to them. I’m going to go ask El, right now, and prove to all of you she’s not going anywhere!”

*I’m going to fight for her.* That was the conclusion he’d come to as he tried to persuade them to have faith in El. Even if he was some boring awkward kid from the midwest who wasn’t even brave enough to tell his parents the last thing he wanted for his future was to be an engineer, but he loved El. He’d loved her since he was fourteen. Was it too much of himself to think that he made her happy? Well it didn’t matter. Mike had meant what he said all those years ago, he wasn’t losing her again. And now it meant fighting for her.

He tried to rehearse in his mind what he was going to say, realizing he would most likely have to say it in front of Kali, who she had come to worship, as he walked down the hallway. Bravery couldn’t fail him now. Faint arguing could be heard coming from her room. *El, I know Kali means a lot to you, I know that she’s the only one who knows what you’ve been through, but I love you, we all love you, and maybe, if you stay, we could-*

“-what do you have here, Jane, that is so important?”

Right outside El’s cracked door, Mike stopped. He could see Kali, face frustrated with her hands on her hips. Mike’s heart skipped a beat, and that’s when he noticed El, pulling her curly hair, facing away from Kali.

El whirled around. "Hopper is here! And Joyce, and my brothers-"

"They are not your real family, Jane!"

"Neither was Axel, or Dottie, or Mick! You weren't related to them either, but you called them family! You called them *home!* " El stomped her foot, and Mike felt a flash of pride, albeit, confusion. *Mick, Dottie... who the hell...* "This is *my* home, Kali! My friends are here, and Mike is here-"

Kali shook her head and scoffed. "You really think that *boy* understands you, Jane? He has no idea what has been taken from you, he is not worthy of you-"

"He *loves* me." shouted El.

"Is that enough? Brenner is out there, Jane, he has resurfaced and he will continue to hurt people. You are going to stay here and let that happen for some privileged boy who's never had to fight for anything?" Kali demanded.

"Enough!" Mike could hear the furniture begin to shake as El's uncontrollable rage continued to spread. Her powers had only gotten stronger over the years, but there was nothing resembling fear in Kali's eyes.

"Why do wear that necklace, Jane?" Kali asked again, "With his initials. Are you some sort of slave to him, wearing his chains?"

"I am *not* -"

"Is he any better than Brenner? You let him make your choices! He's the reason you stay, he decides where you go! Why are you following him to college, Jane? People like him are only here to take advantage of you! To hurt you!"

Kali's words echoed off the walls of El's bedroom. And then, silence. No more furniture shaking, no more yelling. But he could hear El breathing as if she was crying. He could see the fight leave her when Kali asked her question, and then suddenly she ripped the necklace off.



“Where do you want to take me?” asked El through gritted teeth, as the necklace fell to floor, glittering on the carpet.

Mike didn’t stick around to hear Kali’s answer.

-

*8:07 pm - The Byers-Hopper’s Dining Room*

“Do you think they’re talking about us in there?”

“I think they’re probably talking about you.” Lucas chuckled and Max full on cackled. To relieve some of the tension Kali and El left in their wake, and that Mike had followed, everyone had gotten up from their seats and started mulling around the dining room. Joyce was the first to leave in one last attempt to find something for dinner and Hopper had gone with her. That left Will, Max, Lucas, and Dustin to fill the silence, because Nancy and Jonathan were quietly whispering to each other, paying no mind to the others. Lucas had taken to sitting on the table, and Max and Will stood next to him.

“Probably trash talking your terrible flirting, Henderson.” Max poked her friend in the shoulder, “Seriously, it was a total trainwreck.”

“This whole night’s been a trainwreck.” whistled Will.

“Dustin sucks at flirting,” Lucas mocked in a high pitched voice.

“I don’t sound like that!” protested Dustin.

“I thought he was cute until he opened his mouth!” Max piled on in an equally high falsetto.

“Listen, I don’t care what they say about me, I just want to eat!” Dustin threw his hands up in the air, and even though Lucas and Max laughed, it was hard to tell whether or not he was kidding.

“Do you guys think Mike’s right?” Will asked, reinstating the awkwardness they’d all been avoiding for the last five minutes. Despite their false cheer Will had remained quiet and solemn. “That El’s not gonna leave?”

"I dunno, man. Maybe. Honestly, it could go either way." Lucas shrugged.

"Mike is pretty good at talking sense into her," Max bit her lip, "but what if Kali just puts an image in her head with her spooky powers of Mike fucking up his big speech or saying something awful or telling her to go?"

Lucas rubbed Max's shoulder, "Babe, I know you're like an expert at seeing the worst in people," Max nodded, "but I think you're overthinking this. It's not like I like her either, but I don't think she's that bad."

"I'm with Lucas," Nancy spoke up, "I mean, Kali did seem nice?"

"You just said she was trying to make a move on me." Jonathan pointed out.

Will, Dustin, Lucas, and Max all turned to Nancy with the same befuddled look. "I was just saying that she was... oddly interested in you." defended Mike's older sister.

"Yeah, and what was with her weird interest in Steve?" Dustin asked, scratching his head.

"Yeah, maybe if he was actually here he could sweep Kali off her feet with his stupid charming face and fix this whole situation. But *no*, he has to be at the stupid police academy, thanks a lot, Steve!" Max crossed her arms and pouted.

Just then the door swung open and Joyce and Hopper walked in, Hopper looking angrier than he had when he left.

"Find any food?" Dustin sat up.

"Dustin, let go of the food!" shouted Lucas.

"No, I kinda agree." Will murmured, his stomach growling as if to agree. "All this waiting and anxiety is making me want to stress eat."

"We weren't really looking for food." Joyce admitted.

"That's it." The door flew open and Mike came storming in. The first noticeable thing was the way his face was contorted, angry and hurt written all over it. He was blinking back tears as he flew through the room. "I'm out."

"Wait!" Max grabbed him, "what happened in there?"

"Exactly what you thought was going to happen!" he yelled, jerking away from her and backing up, "I'm done, I'm leaving."

Lucas and Max shared a brief look, Max mouthing "Oh no," and then Lucas was running after Mike, chasing him out onto the Byers' porch. There Mike stood bracing himself against the porch railing.

"Dude, you can't run out like that!" Lucas tried to catch his breath, "What happened in there, did you talk to them?"

"I didn't have to, Kali said enough." Mike answered quietly, his voice and face dark.

"And she said?" Lucas asked.

"That I'm not worthy of El! It doesn't matter if I love her." shouted Mike.

Lucas felt a wave of confusion come over him. "So what? Who cares what Kali thinks?"

"El cares!" he yelled. "You all made that very clear, and she made that clear in there."

"Mike, you're being irrational."

"No, I'm not, Lucas! You weren't- you- you weren't in there, you didn't see El. Kali went off on me and El just stood there. Obviously I don't mean to her as much as I thought." Mike's voice cracked, and he turned away from Lucas.

"Is that all they said?" Lucas put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Why were they even talking about you?"

Sighing, Mike just shook his head, brushing Lucas' hand off his

shoulder. "Kali doesn't see anything here that's staying here for. She made a pretty convincing argument. I didn't stay after that."

"Okay, Mike," it was Lucas' turn to sigh. "just know that what I'm about to say, I say as a friend. Both you and El have this problem, like a cute couple thing or whatever, it doesn't matter, where you eavesdrop on some conversation and the second something happens you don't like, you get emotional and storm away without getting the whole picture. So, maybe, El did stand up to Kali, but you just didn't see it-"

"Brenner's still alive." Mike cut him off with quiet words.

"And- wait what?"

"Kali said that Brenner's resurfaced, that he's back to hurting people." whispered Mike.

"That's *not* possible." Lucas said, trying to keep the disbelief from leaking into his voice, "The freaking Demogorgon ate him, we were all there that night!"

His friend shook his head again. "No, it's not just Kali who's said that. There was another man, one who worked for Brenner, El and Kali and her gang tried to kill him back in 1984. He said that if they let him live he would take him to Brenner."

"Dude, I-"

"You guys said that I know El the best, and the El I know wouldn't turn her back on those people Brenner's hurting. Besides, now she has a chance." Mike put his head in his hands.

"A chance for what?" Lucas asked.

"To do what she never could here, avenge her mom." The only time Lucas had ever seen Mike this defeated was back that night in November of 1983, and he would know because Mike looked like that the whole next year. "So she'll leave, I don't doubt it."

Irrational as always, Mike never had any trouble stubbornly standing by his emotions. It made him perfect for El, but terrible at handling

stressful, high emotion situations. But once he could, he was always the one to think of the plan. All Lucas had to was snap him out of this crazy mindset.

Except, Mike was already leaving, and Lucas was left out of ideas. His friend was unlocking his car door and throwing the door open. “Mike, you can’t leave!”

Mike’s response was to start the car and back out of the Byers drive way instead of staying there to listen. Lucas let out a long sigh as he watched him drive away, only one annoyed comment coming to his mind to sum up this whole damn night.

“White people!”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I've got an amazing sequel for this story planned. please give this chapter love to breath life into the next chapter and sequel! Also, I'd love to hear what you think of the jokes. (and if you caught the Brooklyn 99 and The Office references!)

catch me on tumblr @sstrangerthaneleven

### **Author's Note:**

I'd love to hear what you think of the story and what your opinion of Kali is! xoxo, Savannah